DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 093 030 CS 500 812

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TITLE Understanding McLuhan: An Extension of Rhetoric.
PUB DATE 70
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 1970)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Cultural Factors; Higher Education; *Mass Media; Media Technology; *Rhetorical Criticism; Social Change; *Speech; *Technological Advancement
IDENTIFIERS *McLuhan (Marshall)

ABSTRACT

The major principles of Marshall McLuhan are of great value to the field of speech. Four major principles are evident in McLuhan's work: the media is a broad explanatory basis for historical and cultural change; media is an extension of man; media can be classified as hot or cool; and man explains change by rearview mirrorism. The value of McLuhan's principles lies in their application by rhetorical critics, especially in providing understanding of how technological innovations influence man's perception. (RB)

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Understanding McLuhan: An Extension of Rhetoric

Thomas E. Harris

In reviewing the Wingspread Conference in The Prospect of Rhetoric, Edward P. J. Corbett observes: "I found it rather curious that only one of the five authors even mentioned Marshall McLuhan. By any definition one may choose to propose, McLuhan has to be regarded as a rhetorician, and if McLuhan will learn to sit long enough to develop some of his theories in depth instead of just darting out a new set of heuristic probes every month and indulging his Joycean delight in puns, he may yet come to be acknowledged as one of the major rhetoricians of this century."[1] Marie Hochmuth Nichols' analysis of the same book also warns against ignoring the importance of McLuhan's work.[2] In spite of his apparent importance, little has been written in the field of speech about him.[3]

Marshall McLuhan does have an important message for rhetoricians to consider. In many cases, of course, McLuhan makes it difficult to determine exactly what the message is. As Tom Wolfe notes: "Marshall McLuhan started out like most of the celebrated academic oracles of the past 100 years or so, namely writing things that were incomprehensible to 'l'homme moyen intellectual,' which is French for what I call your average culturatus."[4] If the early works of McLuhan are somewhat

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unclear, they certainly have not been uncontroversial. Indeed, he has provoked an extensive debate concerning the effects of media on man.[5]

Four major principles are evident in McLuhan's work. These principles are: 1) the media is a broad explanatory basis for historical and cultural change; 2) media is an extension of man; 3) media can be classified as hot or cool; and 4) man explains change by rearview mirrorism.

His first principle, that media is the broad explanatory basis for historical and cultural change, is evident in many of his works. In The Media Is the Massage, he concludes: "All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, asthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without knowledge of the way media work as environments."[6] He argues that it is how people communicate, not what they communicate that matters. Literally, the medium is the message. "Societies," he contends, "have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication."[7] He supports his position by tracing man's development through three major periods--the Tribal man, the Detribalized man, and the Retribalized man.

Tribal man lived in a world of sound. The only way to communicate

and survive was by speaking to other men. As McLuhan phrases it, "hearing was believing." Man was orally oriented and lived in acoustic space where the ear dominated man's life.[8]

Tribal man, however, developed the ability to write symbols. At first there were drawings, and then an alphabet emerged. Men communicated through symbols without actually seeing each other. As a consequence, men became separated and accustomed to the restricted space dominated by the eye. "The phonetic alphabet forced the magic world of the ear to yield to the neutral world of the eye. Man was given an eye for an ear."[9]

This transition from an oral to a visual society lead to the Detribalized man. In The Gutenberg Galaxie McLuhan argues that Gutenberg revolutionized society.[10] The mass availability of printed material imposed a pseudo-logic through its linear, step-by-step nature. It imposed the idea that when one event follows another there is a causal relationship. Man forgot that sequence is additive and not causal. As McLuhan states, "It can be argued, then, that the phonetic alphabet, alone, is the technology that has been the means for creating 'civilized' man. The separate individuals equal before a written code of law. Separateness of the individual, continuity of space and of time, and uniformity of codes are the prime marks of literate and civilized societies."[11] Stated in a different form but with the same message, he continues, "civilization is built on literacy

because literacy is a uniform processing of a culture by a visual sense extended in space and time by the alphabet."[12] The literacy, however, allowed civilized man to withdraw from other men and therefore tended to fragment society. McLuhan sees a true distinction between the pre-literate and literate man. "Where a visual space is an organized continuum of a uniformed connected kind, the ear world is a world of simultaneous relationships."[13] During the Detribalized state, then, man became compartimentalized, fragmented, separated, and regimented. He learned to follow and expect lines, sequence, and rigidity.

The final phase in the transition of man is the Retribalized man. He is the electric man in the electric era. The telegraph began the electric era where man became subjected to "instant awareness." "We now live in a global village . . . a simultaneous happening. We are now back in acoustic space."[14] The electric circuitry has had three effects. First, men meet men. "Electric circuitry profoundly involves men with one another. Information pours upon us, instanteously and continuously. As soon as information is acquired, it is very rapidly replaced by still newer information. Our electrically configured world forced us to move from the habit of data classification to the mode of pattern recognition."[15] Men, then, are forced to respond to one another and to information in a total confrontation.

The recognition of other men lead to the second effect, we can no longer ignore minorities. "It is this implosive factor that alters

the position of the Negro, the teen-ager, and some other groups. They can no longer be contained, in the political sense of limited association. They are now involved in our lives, as we in theirs, thanks to the electric media."[16] Whereas with the written word we had the choice of what we were willing to read, the electric media is so pervasive that we must respond to all situations and can no longer ignore them.

The speed and instantaneous nature of the electric media caused the demise of the sequence, the third effect. Everything became instantaneous. As he relates, "So the greatest of all reversals occured with electricity, that ended sequences by making things instant. With instant speed the causes of things began to emerge to awareness again, as they had not done with things in sequence and in concatenation accordingly. Instead of asking which came first, the chicken or the egg, it suddenly seemed that a chicken was an egg's idea for getting more eggs."[17]

Retribalized man, then, has become involved with the world around him. He has returned to the oral tradition. However, he has now become universally involved. This universal involvement is spawned by McLuhan's second principle that all media are extentions of man. This principle has always been in effect. The cave man's ax was an extension of the hand. The detribalized man's book was an extension of the eye. Our clothing is an extension of the skin. The wheel is an extension of the foot. And perhaps most importantly, electric

circuitry, the telegraph, telephone, television, and so on, are extensions of the senses and the brain. The computer is an extension of the central nervous system. McLuhan explains, "The computer is by all odds the most extraordinary of all the technological clothing ever devised by men, since it is the extension of our central nervous system."[18] This is an important principle of McLuhan. The medium is the "massage," true, but it also is the vehicle for accomplishing what the human body by itself could not accomplish. The ability to travel is enhanced by extending the capacity of the foot. Henry Ford did more than invent the assembly line, he also allowed man to travel extensively. The most controversial aspect of McLuhan's principle is the computer being an extension of the central nervous system. However, the astronauts would surely agree that the computer on the Apollo missions freed their minds from a great deal of calculations which essentially extended the power of their minds. If clothing allows the skin to do more such as travel in space, then the concept that the computer also allows the mind freedom is not difficult to accept. However, not all media affect man in the same way which leads to his third principle, hot and cool media.

Generally, cool media are low in definition. They are like the sense of touch. They invite participation of all of one's facilities. For example, the auditory media is normally low in definition so the listener must be high in participation to understand the output of

the media. Little information is provided which requires the listener to work harder, become more involved, and to participate. Speech is a cool medium because little information is really provided in speech. "The phone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener."[20] A cool medium is high in participation and low in definition.

On the other hand, a hot medium is high and sharp in definition[21] or intensity. Hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. Naturally, therefore, a hot medium like radio has very different effects on the user from a cool medium like the telephone. Several examples by McLuhan explain the point. "There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in 'high definition.' High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, 'high definition.' A cartoon is 'low definition,' simply because very little visual information is provided."[22] Another example, especially pertinent to the field of speech is provided by McLuhan. "Any hot medium allows for less

participation than a cool one, as a lecture makes for less participation than a seminar, and a book for less than dialogue." [23] This distinction between the types of media provides a useful method of gauging audience participation. "New" methods of teaching that are "non-directive" are essentially cool, in the McLuhan sense if not the street sense, methods of teaching.

The most important principle of McLuhan may be that of rearview mirrorism. As he states, "We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future."[24] We always see the present in terms of the past so we fail to see changes until after they have taken place. The implications are explained by McLuhan. "Perhaps our survival (certainly our comfort and happiness) depends upon our recognizing the nature of our new environment. It is sometimes blamed on the computer, which we have the habit of calling a 'machine.' This, of course, is pure rear-view mirrorism, seeing the old environment in the mirror of the new one while ignoring the new one."[25] The importance of this principle is our failure to use current insights to understand the changes that occur. The writers at the Wingspread Conference may have been guilty of rearview mirrorism by not discussing McLuhan. Explanations of current rhetorical acts may rely too heavily on the traditional interpretations of the field. McLuhan is suggesting that the answers being sought at the conference can be supplied by observing what is presently occuring in society. If this is true, then this last principle may

by McLuhan's most important contribution to the field of rhetoric.

This paper has been an attempt to summarize what appear to be the major principles of McLuhan. These include the effect of media on man, media as an extension of man, the distinction between hot and cool media, and rearview mirrorism. Right or wrong, McLuhan is worth considering by anybody in the field of rhetoric. As Tom Wolfe concludes: "Even at his worst, McLuhan inspires you to try and see and understand in a new way. And in the long run this may prove to be his great contribution."[26] McLuhan's ability to say things in a different manner forces the reader to consider them differently. But Wolfe does not end his phrase there, "If right, he will rank as the number one genius of all times. But even if wrong, he will remain the man who first made the world wake up to the psychological impact of technological innovation."[27] Either way, McLuhan should be read and considered. Perhaps McLuhan places himself in perspective with a story in the margin of the final page of War and Peace in the Global Village. "Responding to first-night cheers of 'Author! Author!,' G. B. Shaw went before the curtain only to be greeted by a lone boo. He replied, 'My dear Fellow, I quite agree with you, but what are we two against so many?"[28]

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Footnotes

[1]Edward P. J. Corbett, "Rhetoric In Search of a Past, Present, and Future," in The Prospect of Rhetoric, ed. Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 174.

[2]Roger E. Nebergall and Marie H. Nichols, "Two Windows on The Prospect of Rhetoric," QJS, 58 (1972), p. 94.

[3]I am aware of three articles. They are: Bruce E. Gronbeck, "McLuhanism's Rhetorical Theory: An Exposition and Evaluation," Ohio Speech Journal, 4 (1967), pp. 44-50; Patrick Mahoney, "McLuhan in the Light of Classical Rhetoric," College Composition and Communication, 20 (1969), pp. 12-7; John H. Sloan, "Understanding McLuhan: Some Implications for the Speech Teacher and Critic," ST, 17 (1968), pp. 140-44.

[4]Tom Wolfe, "McLuhan: Through Electric Circuitry to God," 25, March 1969, p. 36.

[5]Two good collections of essays on McLuhan's theories are: Raymond Rosenthal, ed., McLuhan: Pro and Con (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968)., and Gerald E. Stern, ed., McLuhan: Hot and Cool (New York: Dial Press, 1967).

[6]Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, The Medium Is the Massage (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 26.

[7]Ibid., p. 9.

[8]Ibid., p. 44.

[9]Ibid..

[10]Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxie: The Making of Typographic Man (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

[11]Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), p. 84.

[12]Ibid., p. 86.

[13]McLuhan, Massage, p. 111.

[14]Ibid., p. 63.

[15]Ibid.

[16]McLuhan, Understanding, p. 5.

[17]Ibid., p. 12.

[18]Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, War and Peace in the Global Village (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 35.

[19]McLuhan, Understanding, p. 44.

[20]Ibid., pp. 22-3.

[21]Ibid., p. 37.

[22]Ibid., p. 22.

[23]Ibid., p. 23.

[24]McLuhan, Massage, p. 74.

[25]McLuhan, War, pp. 17-8.

[26]Wolfe, p. 55.

[27]Ibid.

[28]McLuhan, War, p. 190.